

# Bodies in school: reflections on Physical Education and religion

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is the result of a doctoral research study on the tension between some knowledge produced in the domain of Physical Education (PE) and those produced in the religious sphere. It is an ethnographic study conducted in a public school in the city of Campinas, SP, Brazil. Five evangelical girls attending high school were selected. The goal was to understand how those girls relate Church teachings with other ways of managing their bodies, which they learn outside the religious domain, and also the extent to which PE plays a tension-building role in that relationship.

**Keywords:** Physical Education. Body. Evangelical religion

## 1 INTRODUCTION

An ethnographic study conducted in an Assembly of God evangelical church a few years ago<sup>1</sup> shows a kind of religious education specifically directed towards “uses of the bodies”<sup>2</sup> of the girls who attended it. That type of education somehow involved participation of those girls in Physical Education (PE) classes. While we saw bodies in the church environment that, for their physical and gestural characteristics, displayed a kind of evangelical posture, such characteristics became almost imperceptible to the eyes when they were out of that environment. That happened because research

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<sup>1</sup>The work originated from the author’s dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>The term “uses of the body” refers to the concept put forward by Marcel Mauss (2003) in the classic text “Techniques of the body”.

subjects established adjustments and/or accommodations between institutional religious practice and daily life outside the church. That was the starting point for this study to understand to what extent PE contents might create tension in those accommodation movements.

Seeking to understand how these girls relate Church teachings with other ways of managing their bodies that they learn outside the religious domain and also the extent to which PE creates tension in that relationship, we conducted an ethnographic study in a public school in Campinas, SP, Brazil, during some secondary education (SE) classes. In addition to direct contact with the group, other students, teachers and staff were also instrumental for this research. We chose SE because we perceived the importance of subjects' narrative and oral ability to reconstruct their trajectories with respect to the topic of study. We also believe that conflicts between religious education and daily life can appear more intensely and generate more conflict at a life stage in which subjects are supposedly going from a relationship with their parents based on more obedience and dependence towards adult life and the consequent autonomous behavior. We empirically found that many believers at that stage threaten to leave the church, refuse to be baptized, and establish a more confrontational stance towards their parents. The girls, all belonging to the Christian Congregation of Brazil (CC) or the Assembly of God (AG) Evangelical Church,<sup>3</sup> were observed during the 2011 school year, particularly during PE classes. We included a girl belonging to the Nova Salém Baptist Church in the analysis because she had belonged to AG for years although she now attends another denomination. From her statements about the reasons that led their family to change churches and how it was to belong to AG, we concluded that she would be a good informant. Therefore, five girls were selected: **Ana Julia**,<sup>4</sup> a 15-year-old student in her 1<sup>st</sup> year of SE and whose family has always belonged to AG; **Sirléia**,

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<sup>3</sup>Understanding the scope presupposed by the category "evangelical", we warn that what we call "evangelical" in the text refers specifically to the denominations studied, i. e. AG and CC. The choice of those two denominations was due to the fact that they are still more rigid and conservative when compared to other similar churches.

<sup>4</sup>All names mentioned here are fictitious.

who is 15 years old and studies in the same class as Ana Julia. She also has attends AG since she was born (as they often say, she “was born in the church”); **Maria**, who is 18 and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of SE (she failed her 2<sup>nd</sup> SE year). She has attended CC since she was born. Her grandfather is the pastor of a church in a nearby town and, though she does not attend his church, her family is very strict and lives under his supervision; **Renata** is 16 years old and is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of SE. She has attended CC for about 10 years. She looks “cooler” than the girls already mentioned and she is the kind of girl who would face her parents with subtlety; **Letícia**, who does not belong to any of the selected churches but provided relevant information about the time she attended AD, is 16 and studies in the same class as **Renata**.<sup>5</sup>

We seek to understand how, in terms of body practices, they relate a kind of “religious knowledge” to that produced in other knowledge domains that also intend to play an agency role over individuals’ bodies and self-care. Although we focused on the type of knowledge produced and conveyed in PE classes, our interest was not in the class itself or the pedagogical work, but in the way contents of the discipline generated negotiation needs for subjects in terms of a kind of “use of the body” aimed at by religious education. In addition, we knew that what we were looking for exceeded the scope of the sports court and the school. We noticed the separation of some students and the grouping of others that directly interfered in a longer coexistence relationship. We saw that everything in there was the product of relations that went beyond school walls or the boundaries of the sports court. Therefore, it only made sense to think of behaviors observed if we understood them from a point of view based on “relationships”– between the girls studied, their colleagues and teachers, the groups they were part of out of school, their families, etc.

More than that, we should be aware of these relationships with respect to other places or institutions that in some way, play

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<sup>5</sup>Girls were chosen not because we thought that such implications do not reach boys and men of those denominations, but because what caught our attention from the beginning was the emphasis on caring for the female body that is visible in their appearances and gestures.

an agency role regarding body knowledge and experiences and are linked with the object in question.

## **2 THE (LACK OF) COMPASS BETWEEN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

I can't help remembering what we learn [in church]. But I don't buy everything. Some people think that playing ball is widely practiced in the world, but I think it makes no sense [Ana Julia].

Conceptions about the body, gestures, PE aims and its contents are not related to our understanding of the area, but rather to the understanding of the girls studied and sometimes, of the other people who participated in the study. And being aware of that is essential for the reader to understand where the notions attributed to PE during the text come from. In this case, girls mention notions on body aesthetics, sports performance and leisure all the time as the purpose of school PE. Rather than being misguided, these understandings demonstrate what PE actually is for the subjects under study. After all, that view of PE created the tensions that interested us so much.

By monitoring the selected students, we could understand how they deal with some issues and how they manage, in their daily life, ways of body management that come to them through several channels, especially through knowledge produced by PE. We still have to take into account a kind of “native understanding” about the body, in which the idea of uses seems very appropriate if we consider that the evangelical studies understand the body as an instrument given by God and that salvation depends on its use. In this case, the division between body and spirit reflects the division between “world” and church (God).

Today, impositions on the body have changed. The meanings attributed to “uses of the body” have changed to the same extent that religion has changed. It seems that, in a simultaneous movement, religion and “uses of the body” gradually abandoned experiences

that belonged to the public sphere in order to become increasingly individual experiences. There is a shift in the understanding of the relationship between body and “religious commitment”. What we see is not cessation of prohibitions but a new distribution of coercions and greater autonomy of choice.

According to Pierucci (1997), the process of secularization<sup>6</sup> promoted by the division between the political and religious spheres provides conditions for new religious movements to grow. This process generates what the author called “religious plurality”. Based on this notion – of religious plurality – a few years later the author reiterates the argument that the subject moves to a more pluralistic religious field, made of individual choices and the dilution of previous community ties. He says that the subject is individualized by changing religions, because he or she abstracts inherited ties. According to Pierucci’s Weberian reading (2006), besides “secularization”, we have another phenomenon that, together with the former, has influenced the world’s rationalization process, which the author calls “disenchantment”. Based on science and philosophy, explanations of the world put magic-religious arguments in the background. Those two processes – “secularization” and “disenchantment” – have changed the notion of body, de-sanctifying it. There is some institutional deregulation that changes contemporary ways of believing. “Religious institutions continue to lose their social and cultural capacity for imposing and regulating beliefs and practices” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 1999 p. 46). This does not mean that religious notions ceased to somehow manage the body and its practices. Religious references still exist, but the way they operate changes permanently. If, as stated by Almeida (2010), religious things are simultaneously expanding and dissolving, it seems that the idea of disenchantment does not stand. Therefore, it is not an argument for saying that “sacred references” no longer generate implications on “used of the body”. The fact is that even if it seems to lose strength and authority on daily life, religion is still significant when what is at stake is the management of individuals’ behavior.

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<sup>6</sup>To understand it better, see PIERUCCI, 1998.

This permanent tension between what is religious and what is secular (or mundane) can be exemplified in several of the girls' statements. For instance, Ana Julia said: "*The only thing we can't do is to be vain*". This is why Paula Montero (1999) argues that different theoretical lines were linked to studies of religious segments in an almost standardized way, so that Protestantism, for example, is always related to Weberian theory, which links values to behaviors. In this case, values that deny vanity and the concern with appearance are closely related to behaviors of people who, like Ana Julia, attend the churches in question. That type of behavior, related to body care, is built on the values preached in and by the church. But despite the close relationship between evangelicals and behaviors linked to moral values, Almeida (2010, p. 374) states that we now see a certain "gap" between institutional teaching and believers' practice. "It is not uncommon that leaders preach certain behavioral patterns and people follow them partially while keeping their own rules". He also says that religious identity and its corresponding practice match increasingly less. When considering that church, in an attempt to manage subjects, comes into tension with other institutions, we can understand the fact that churches are gradually making room for things that used to be too "mundane" to be allowed. "Lack of compass" might suggest two ways of understanding the relationship between institutional teaching and daily practice. According to a dictionary (FERREIRA, 2001), lack of compass (*descompasso*) means something out of sync, so that there is no agreement between distinct spheres. We can also think of it based on a compass (instrument consisting of two rods that are articulated to draw circles). In this case, "lack of compass" would indicate a line out of the circle. In fact, the two meanings are very similar and serve to explain the lack of regularity between the spheres already mentioned. However, we use the second meaning because we found it more interesting to think about "what comes next". The fact that lack of compass does not allow to form a kind of circle with regular shapes does not mean that no drawing will be formed. This lack of measure will result in other drawings with other forms and measures which, while they are not regular, point to something

that changed over the compass's movement. Thinking similarly, that type of movement – thought of as the mismatch between institutional teaching and believers' practice – has always existed, albeit in different forms and intensities. In an analogous way, we can also think that those movements result in specific drawings. We are interested in those shapes and designs, which have been developing in terms of body practices and that are formed after that "mismatch". In this sense, it is as if the very lack of compass could show another type of measure – not new, but with different shapes, where Pentecostal believers draw their own designs, but in which I see certain regularities. Perhaps we can say that these agreements are being established with knowledge and "permission" (in a veiled sense) by the the religious institution, which assimilates changes and adjusts to the new demands of "faith". The following examples demonstrate a change in dynamics of religious transmission and mainly in practices related to behavioral pattern, which means that thinking about experiences related to religious practices suggests a reflection on its implications on the body, as we can see from the statement below:

Physical education is constantly provoking the other's eye [Sirléia].

The students' understanding of PE seems that of a discipline that aims to teach body care (in a narrow sense, of beauty and health standards) and different sports (in the narrow sense of training and technique). In parallel, ideas appear as how to teach the practice of physical activity beyond school life, to educate for leisure, and the somehow diluted relationship between PE and socialization. In this sense, the girls studied here – being evangelical – are not the only ones to have that view about PE. What is particular to this case is the way the religious institution establishes tension with that knowledge that, for them, belongs to the scope of PE.

Such view of PE is perfect for the church's opposing discourse that preaches precisely the enhancement of moral rather than physical values. The sentence quoted as an epigraph in this section demonstrates this very clearly, which is in fact what bothers the

church when it comes to PE. Body exposure and use in practices considered by the church as “mundane” seem the key point of analysis.

I think the church takes care of my spiritual person, my soul. And PE teaches me to take care of my physical person, my body. I know people in my church think we only have to worry about our souls. But I, Maria, I think we always have to take care of both together. What good is there in taking care of the soul and not taking care of life? [Maria].

Maria’s interesting words are the way she opposes the act of “taking care of the soul” to that of “taking care of life”. It is basically the same opposition between what belongs to the church and what is mundane, but the way she articulates it marks a clear stance towards those oppositions. It is as if she claimed that even if something belongs to “the world,” she may need it and legitimately desire it.

After a comment like Maria’s, Ana Julia said that when she watched her colleagues play, she always felt a strong desire to take part in PE classes. Once, after talking to her mother, she decided to tell the pastor about the embarrassment she went through for not participating, including pressure by the teacher, who always insisted that she changed her mind and participated. Asked about the pastor’s answer, she said he did not allow her to wear pants to attend PE classes, but that she could take part in some activities such as volleyball, for example. Questioned about the reasons for the pastor’s decision, she explained that he thought it could “tarnish” the church’s image, for God does not like such attitudes and in cases like that the holy spirit ceases to inhabit the person’s body.

I think it’s weird that the pastor even let her play volleyball. Once, when we still went to AG, my sister told the pastor that she would only play volleyball, because it had no body contact like football and stuff, but he said it was a very vulgar activity [Leticia].

This statement shows how the religious view is heading toward changes and adjustments. But, in addition to changes in the religious sphere, the changes we saw took place in their views on PE. In previous field research with primary school female students, their discourses on PE were not so strongly related to aesthetic and health issues; however, those issues now seem to be part of what the girls see as the goal of the discipline.

While discourses relating PE to “working out” in order to look pretty and also to physical activity in gyms did not appear in previous research, they now seem to be the bulk of the discipline in the opinion of selected girls. These are important issues with regard to the very opposition of religious views on PE. Once the girls relate PE classes to a beautiful body, to the feeling of pleasure when practicing certain physical activities at leisure times and places and, in general, to body care, it becomes easier to understand the concerns present in the religious discourse. While these issues appear diluted in their discourse, they explain that to surrender to the delight of a game, for example, is seen as something dangerous.

When understanding PE from the point of view of the Humanities, it can be considered as a discipline that aims at something broader than body experiences, even though that is not its ultimate goal. Bracht (1997, p. 22), when discussing the pedagogical specificity of body culture of movement, warns that PE’s conceptual knowledge involves a dual character. Such ambiguity can be represented by two issues: the specificity of the area is guaranteed by a kind of “know-how” and by “knowing about how”. Bracht explains that while human movement is taken as the area’s object and that becomes a consensus, we create another type of polarization. In this case, the discussion is based on the concern about focusing on an education “of” or “through” movement, or both. Being related to an idea of body culture of movement, knowledge about moving was soon incorporated as a goal of school PE and, as a result, it developed, according to the author, the “pre-conception” that what was being proposed in that case was to transform PE in a discourse about movement, removing

it from the center of pedagogical action in PE” (BRACHT, 1996, p. 25). Seeking to expand the idea about human moving and its relations with knowledge of reality and communication with the world, Bracht suggests that PE should be concerned about aesthetic education and with education of sensitivity, “which means ‘incorporation’ not through discourse but through ‘body practices’”. Bracht ends his article by stating that the challenge seems to be “neither movement without thought nor movement and thought, but rather **movementthought**” (BRACHT, 1996: 27, emphasis in the original).

Although Bracht’s theoretical framework is different, that concept refers to the idea developed by Le Breton (2009) about the possibilities of an affective experience of movement. In this case, teachers should ensure that experience at school so it can happen outside it. In addition to the discipline’s content and objectives, we believe that it should prepare students for the world of leisure and the experience of playful practices beyond school age, enriching the construction of a movement culture.

While there is a line of thought in PE that looks at it from these concepts and codes, we must mention other forms of understanding it, which, in practice, are still very present in the area. Throughout history, PE has conveyed knowledge about the body, taking on issues pertaining to beauty, physical strength, “well-defined” shapes, motor skills, performance, etc. What we say is that this kind of knowledge, even though it is contradictory to that conveyed by teachers and researchers who think the area based on the Humanities, is still very recurrent in Brazilian schools.

### 3 THE CONTENTS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Samba is complicated, it’s very sensual [Maria].

Many issues present in the girls’ narratives were related to dance. In general, all of them see it as the most “mundane” of body practices. In a lecture on the types of samba, the views expressed

can be summarized as “Samba is not a thing of God”. For girls in general, dancing is a way to show off. In the words of Renata:

You draw attention, you shake your hips and people start noticing you more. Then they think the other falls into error in thinking, right?

Although they relate that practice with what is “discouraged” by the church, most of them say that it can be partly justified as a class content.

In a PE class I could dance, but I could never go clubbing, for example, to dance outside class, no way. I mean, in fact, if it was for the church I couldn't dance at school, either [Sirléia].

Therefore, even though the church condemns the practice, Sirléia seems to notice the differences between what the church and the school demand. She also adds that that: “God will judge me, not others. And if God is God, he has to understand that I need to do school things”. This statement seems insightful to me precisely because it applies the same argument of “mandatoriness” that is present in the religious institution to the school institution. If the church considers that its members need to understand and act based on God's knowledge, Sirléia reverses that logic and says that it is God who must understand her practical need. That way she recognizes the mandatory nature of school.

Such mandatory character seems to apply to most contents. However, when it comes to the so-called June festivals, the argument loses authority. In the words of Letícia and Renata, dancing or joining a party like that “is like doing voodoo”. For them, the church condemns all forms of idolatry and engaging with that is “contaminating oneself”.

Something similar happens with *capoeira*, a very traditional form of African-Brazilian dance-fight. Among all the contents that make up the PE curriculum, *capoeira* is what most generates embarrassments for evangelical students. For the churches we studied, *capoeira* is a body practice that is absolutely related to

African-Brazilian religions, which they oppose as much as the devil himself. In fact, for some evangelicals, the devil is the very representative of those religions.

I wouldn't do it, I'm afraid of these things, dealing with devil's things, no way. And I'm not ignorant, I'm not, I know that the church can be strict with several things, but when it comes to *capoeira* I'm also strict [Sirléia].

In sum, there are many issues involving dance, rhythm, music and *capoeira* that can be thought of in a relationship of tension between one type of management (PE) and other (church). But the examples are not limited to those practices; on the contrary, they extend the sports. Once, while quoting the "Athletes of Christ",<sup>7</sup> Maria commented wryly: "Those are not of our Christ, they might be of may be of another one, but not ours [laughs]."

One of the main issues surrounding churches' disapproval of sports practices is the notion of competition. It is possible for evangelicals, in some cases, to participate in sports activities, but they should never compete. They said in school that no long ago an evangelical female student had been selected to play in a semi-professional volleyball team, but she declined to join the team because her parents forbade it. The gossip in the school corridors criticized the kind of religion that hinders believers' lives rather than helping them.

Once a school teacher who belonged to AD told us her opinion about the game.

To play, even sports, is something clueless, there's temptation, there's bad luck, there's vanity over one's body, it's not advisable. Of course in class they can do it. Now, satisfying one's body when it is not mandatory is twisting things. Why having vanity?

There are many examples related to sports as "mundane" practices. In addition, we can point to a specific issue that seems

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<sup>7</sup>Football players known to belong to evangelical groups.

to put religious knowledge permanently in confrontation with PE: self-exposure. In the girls' view, exposing oneself physically and being noticed as a "body" appears to be the main factor that puts PE in tension with religion. Although the discipline's aims are unrelated to erotization of bodies and movement, the church members we studied see it as related to those issues, which often causes them to discourage PE practice. The possibility of "being noticed" is incited by PE. I am not saying that a teacher, when conducting an activity, provokes students to conscious exposure. The idea of being available to others' eyes may not apply to all situations and, although that does not always occur intentionally, certain part of the discipline is related to a desire to "stand out", although that is not the PE model we advocate. A PE guided by the model of "sportization" implies the "obligation" to be technically "better" than one's opponent and places students in constant evidence. The chance to excel in a particular body practice and to stand out as required for future professionalization reinforces the goal of "being noticed", which should not exist in the school context. Even if we put aside the competitions aimed at the highest levels of performance and think of lower levels, as in a simple class competition, for example, we realize that the mere chance of being seen by the teacher or even by a girl with whom a boy is in love (or vice versa) bring up the desire of "being noticed". What we do mean – exaggerating the opposition to articulate the argument – is that while churches encourage some kind of "hiding", PE encourages "showing". Both stimulate a concern about oneself, but with different means and ends. In this aspect, even the clothes they should wear play an important role for both practices. For physical activities it is advisable to wear appropriate shoes and clothing, just like one needs to know how to dress with "modesty" to be a "good Christian". In this sense, running, jumping, sitting with their legs apart, cycling or dancing are not part of daily lives of the girls studied. Their experiences seem restricted if compared to children who do not have their bodies controlled and monitored by churches. When PE offers a range of gestures by which they exceed the common barrier of "moving", it is as if they had to be

willing to “allow” themselves such a feat. PE, although not always,<sup>8</sup> motivates students to broaden gestures and movement experiences. To the extent that it comes across bodies that were educated to reduce rather than increase their movement experiences, it can generate tension and reflection by the girls regarding the “uses of their own bodies”.

He [the pastor] said that in PE, for example, we should do it decently, like not crouching so much, watching our position when stretching, so we do not provoke men’s eyes. Because he said: if you provoke a man to these things, it’s normal that he wants it and he’ll make you do what he wants. And PE provokes that all the time [Sirléia].

It is as if, in the view of those students, we had, on the one hand, a disciplining institution (PE), which expects students to behave in certain ways through pedagogical practice of specific contents and, on the other hand, another disciplining institution (church) that also expects certain behaviors through the application of its religious content. When the reference is PE – or what it represents in students’ imaginary – the girls think they should have an acceptable body according to imposed standards. When the reference is the church, the value conveyed aims not to desecrate their bodies. For these girls’ religion, the body is seen as “the seat of the Holy Spirit”. So there are – allowed – “desirable practices” and – inadvisable – “mundane practices”. These terms, far from being just “deduced” and reinterpreted in our text, are commonly used by girls.

In any case, when explaining the tension between PE contents and what they learn in church, the girls suggest that the latter’s opposition to the former is possibly based on the idea that, while the church seems to limit body experiences, PE aims to enhance them. Therefore, PE – through sports, dances, fights, games and gymnastics<sup>9</sup> – would aim to provide the largest number of possible

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<sup>8</sup>See the numerous situations in which, due to the PE model used, what happens is precisely the denial of the experience of moving, reducing rather than increasing students’ bodily possibilities.

<sup>9</sup>Although the girls know that all these are PE contents, they always seemed to think that sport is the main one.

experiences with body practices and to contribute to learning forms of body care based on the concepts of health, beauty and quality of life.

Also interesting is the fact that the girls studied have established a relationship between body practices present in the PE and the feeling of pleasure. While in church they learn that they should avoid the “pleasure of the flesh”, in PE they understand that physical sensations are directly related to contents and goals. The very fact that they assign the task of teaching body care to PE makes it a target for the church’s criticism. The feeling of pleasure for being “beautiful” and having achieved a body within the standards imposed by society is driven by vanity – a feeling that is discouraged by the church.

#### **4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We understand that a PE class in which the teacher is aware of the differences in values of the several practices for their students must cause each of them to reflect about the several existing arguments on the subject in question. That is, the class should be the space where students can compare what they have learned, whether in the religious sphere or in any other, with one type of knowledge typical of school and scientific rationalism. Therefore, the following questions remain in our thoughts: Has PE offered possibilities for reflection and reinterpretation of the body based on knowledge produced and experienced in school? Has PE differentiated itself in terms of reflection from what the church does? Has PE been able to build “disenchanted knowledge” that opposes, creates tension to and dialogues with the “enchanted knowledge” coming from the religious field?

While by using the justification of religious freedom some students refuse to participate in certain activities, we have seen that the notion of “mandatory” in the school curriculum can counter this discourse. However, even if the mandatory nature favors the teacher and the school, it cannot ensure that students feel

comfortable performing the activity by itself. It sounds utopian to want students to participate because they actually feel good and see it as important. However, it is even more utopian to believe that by being mandatory, PE will be legitimized in school much longer. We must think about what legitimizes its survival in the school environment. It is not about subjecting students as in another kind of doctrine; we must provide devices that enable and motivate the exercise of reflection.

We assume that PE teachers must ensure that students experience the body practices that are part of the curriculum. Teachers should mediate the construction of the relationship that students create with body practices, whatever form that relationship might take. Only in this way will teachers have a chance to counter the body knowledge that students bring from other institutions. That does not mean that teachers need to worry about specifically dialoguing with religion; they will have to allow students a body view produced in the area. Despite not guaranteeing that this is the best way to understand the body and body practices, it would ensure the expansion of students' view of their bodies, body practices and issues related to the discipline of PE.

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